

St Augustine's and St Mary's Newsletter: Sunday 12 July 2020 5th Sunday after Trinity

Wednesday's Readings: Psalm 119: 129-152; Ezek. 2.3-3.11; 2 Cor.2.5-end

Sunday Readings: Genesis 25:19-end; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-17; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ... So he sold his birthright to Jacob. ... Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Gen. 25:31-34)

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ... But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. (Romans 8:6,9a)

"Hear the parable of the sower ..." (Matt. 13:18)

Brief Reflections by Ela: Identity

Identity seems to be at the heart of some of the most heated discussions these days – whether linked to political leanings, faith or belief or lack thereof, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. We seem perpetually to be declaring ourselves as something – with more and more labels available – to be nailing our colours to the mast as if our very lives depended on it. Unlike Esau, who in our Genesis 25 reading saw no value in his birthright (at least temporarily), our society seems to engage in endless exchanges about it.

Yet our society seems to have lost the art of debate, alas. People are judged, most often mercilessly, on what they say; their words cemented as official declarations rather than a means of working out an issue. More and more people seem unwilling to engage in dialogue; to learn together and allow for difference of opinions. Rather we seem to be more inclined to demand punishment for people who offend us, and our news will be peppered with people issuing public apologies – whether genuine or not, that's a different matter. Whilst challenging injustice is not only commendable but something we as Christians have been called to do, we should also encourage balanced dialogue.

And so, we go back to our fascination with, and often proprietary attitudes towards, identity and its complex entanglements with our bodies; with flesh. In his **letter to the Romans**, Paul often talks about our bodies, primarily to illustrate the struggles that Christians face when reconciling life on Earth with life in Heaven. In chapter 8, Paul offers a solution: he urges his readers to look beyond the flesh and accept the new life in the Spirit as offered by Christ. He writes,

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God ... (Rom. 8:12-16)

We are children of God. Our identity is in Christ. As Jesus himself taught us to pray, we are bold enough to call God 'Our Father in Heaven'. Yet, as children, we need to keep learning – and learning together, for we are also called to be disciples.

During much of Jesus' ministry, there are two groups in attendance: the 'disciples' and the 'crowds' / 'multitudes'. The disciples are those who obey Jesus' call to follow him. The crowds are those to whom Jesus continues to offer a call, and we often find them in the background as Jesus teaches his disciples. Matthew's Gospel has been termed

‘a manual in discipleship’, whereby disciples are called, trained, and commissioned to carry out their mandate to ‘make [more] disciples’ (Matt. 28:19).



Vincent Van Gogh, The Sower, 1888

The Parable of the Sower encapsulates that perfectly. Jesus tells the story to everyone gathered there – ‘great crowds’ (Matt. 13:1) – but he explains it to the disciples. I’ve always found it comforting to imagine Jesus having to explain things to them, because what that tells me is that they didn’t have ‘special knowledge and understanding’ ... that the disciples too were human and could be a bit dim, just like me, needed guidance in discerning the meaning behind Jesus’ words. From the explanation that Jesus gives of the parable, we could infer that the disciples are called to be sowers of the gospel with the aim of ‘bearing fruit’. Quite a commission!

We have a small garden, and we don’t grow crops to eat. We have a handful of raspberry canes and a small cherry tree that keeps the birds entertained, but it’s really mostly small plants and a few bushes. It is wonderful to have our garden, though, and we’ve appreciated it even more during lockdown ... One of my favourite things is a cluster of Nicotiana plants that have survived since last summer, and they’re producing the most amazing scent in the evenings (when it’s not raining!). We’d tried to plant sweet peas in the same spot before – again, for their perfume – but with little success.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve often found sowing difficult ... Seeds are often small and light (have you seen sweet peas seeds?!? ... they’re only a little bigger than mustard seeds!); the lightest breeze can pick them up and make them land where they’re not supposed to! It’s much easier to plant a seedling; a small plant. And even then, success is not guaranteed. The soil could be all wrong; too alkaline or too acidic; too much clay; too much peat; etc, etc. Or, if it’s not the soil, the weather will be a challenge: too much rain / not enough rain; too much sun / not enough sun, and so on and so forth. We’re still trying to work out why the leaves on our usually lovely camellias are turning yellow (any advice would be much appreciated!).

Jesus acknowledges such difficulties in Matthew 13. He warns of ‘evil snatching away what is sown in the heart’; of having no roots during periods of trouble or persecution; and he mentions that ‘the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing’.

When reading the Parable of the Sower, I find it helpful to reflect on Isaiah 55:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be

that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:10-11)

Set in agricultural terms again, this passage balances my anxiety associated with the great commission to sow the gospel and bear fruit. It is down to us as disciples to sow; yes. But we must understand that, in his grace and through his Spirit, God is the one to create the fruit.

Perhaps these days in particular we also need to **remember what exactly we are called to sow**: the 'word of the kingdom' (Matt. 13:18). When describing Jesus, the Gospels echo the words of Isaiah 61:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour; to comfort all who mourn — to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. (Isa. 61:1-3a)

Let us pray that the Spirit will teach us and guide us as we balance our daily lives with the call to be children of God and disciples of Christ. Let us pray that we remain close to our Father in heaven, and to one another.

The Collect of the Day

**Almighty God,
send down upon your Church the riches of your Spirit,
and kindle in all who minister the gospel
your countless gifts of grace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

Notices

Video Sermons: In the coming weeks, the Bishop of Sheffield's senior staff will each be contributing an online video sermon, along with a script, which can be accessed via this link:

<https://www.sheffield.anglican.org/video-sermons> . The videos will be available on Thursday of each week.

Coming Back Together Again! The opening up of our churches for worship is not that simple and also for some of our members who are shielding it still won't be possible for everyone to come back together again. We are working out ways of how we can do this safely. At St Augustine's it is looking like we might be able to offer some worship during August if we can get all the safety measures in place. For St Mary's it is likely to be September. At St Mary's we are going to offer two outside gatherings on Sunday 19th July and Sunday 16th August at 12pm – details on separate email sent out to you. We will keep you as updated as we can on what is happening. In the meantime, we will continue with a weekly reflective sheet and zoom gathering at 11am – please contact Claire if you need details of this.

Roots resources this week include two sets of material - prayers and activities for the lectionary readings <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/i-am-looking-for/public-copies/worshipathome12jul>

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